

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Way, Dennis
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 3:01 PM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) ; Sheridan, Carol; Ag Media; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: RE: MEDIA INQUIRY: Due 1pm Wednesday - on-plant veterinarian program - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) – Thanks.

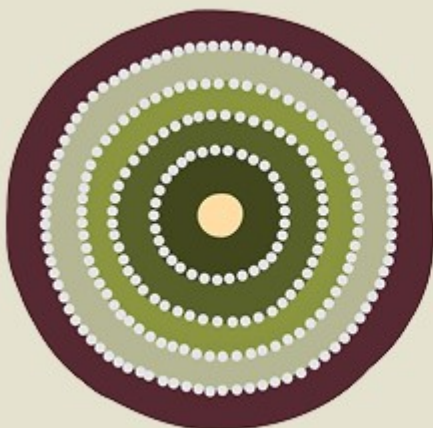
s. 22(1)(a)(ii) – Can you work with our MEB colleagues on a combined response.

Regards - Dennis

Dennis Way
Assistant Secretary | Veterinary and Export Meat Branch
Exports and Veterinary Services Division

Phone +61 3 8391 8497 | Mobile s. 47F(1)

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
GPO Box 858, Canberra, ACT, 2601



We acknowledge the continuous connection
to the lands, seas and waters of Australia.
We pay respect to Elders past and present
for their productivity, innovation and sustainability.

OFFICIAL

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 2:38 PM
To: Sheridan, Carol <Carol.Sheridan@aff.gov.au>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis

<Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: MEDIA INQUIRY: Due 1pm Wednesday - on-plant veterinarian program - The Guardian
[SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

The OPV cohort sit within the Veterinary & Export Meat Branch (VEMB) led by @Way, Dennis.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) can you please review from a MEB, whole-of-regulatory system perspective.

Thanks

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

📧 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) | ✉ s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



OFFICIAL

From: Sheridan, Carol <Carol.Sheridan@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 2:32 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: MEDIA INQUIRY: Due 1pm Wednesday - on-plant veterinarian program - The Guardian
[SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Thanks for including me s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Happy to assist as relevant, but this enquiry sits primarily with Meat Exports.

Thanks,

Carol

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 2:10 PM

To: Sheridan, Carol <Carol.Sheridan@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Subject: MEDIA INQUIRY: Due 1pm Wednesday - on-plant veterinarian program - The Guardian

OFFICIAL

Good afternoon,

We've received a lengthy media inquiry regarding on-plant veterinarians working inside export-licensed abattoirs (please feel free to redirect if more appropriate).

The **Guardian's chief investigative reporter Christopher Kaus** would like to know:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above? (SEE BELOW)
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
- why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?
- why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?
- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

For context, the reporter has provided the below as background to this request:

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.
- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on "profound problems" they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to "chronic understaffing". The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:
 - an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. "These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality,"

the complaint alleges. "It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors."

- a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were "profound problems" with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia's trade. "A culture of 'see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil' will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia's reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere," he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: "After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager's] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM's response was to reply 'I wish you hadn't told me that'. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV." He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. "In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner." The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a "cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal" in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: "I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant's Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly." The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.
 - a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: "The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."
- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.
- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:
- they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively

discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.

- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.

- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.

- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."

- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

If you could please have a response to us by 1pm Wednesday, that would be much appreciated.

Please let me know if you have any comments or concerns.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Curran, Carmel
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 6:36 PM
To: Ag Media; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Subject: FW: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

FYI

OFFICIAL

From: Curran, Carmel
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 6:29 PM
To: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** @aff.gov.au>
Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Sounds like a good idea. Can you please confirm that Tina is aware and that legal are in the loop – given the history.

Cheers

Carmel

Carmel Curran

Assistant Secretary Communication and Media Branch
Enterprise Strategy and Governance Division

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Ngunnawal Country
Agriculture House, 70 Northbourne Ave, Canberra ACT 2600

Ph Mobile **s. 47F(1)** | Email carmel.curran1@aff.gov.au

www.agriculture.gov.au



We acknowledge the continuous connection of First Nations Traditional Owners and Custodians to the lands, seas and waters of Australia. We recognise their care for and cultivation of Country. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and recognise their knowledge and contribution to the productivity, innovation and sustainability of Australia's agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries.

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 6:27 PM
To: Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Thanks Carmel

Heading offline for a bit, happy to chat in the morning. Keen to get our teams together so that we are aligned in what we are preparing – as you rightly said, there is a lot!

Cheers

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

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A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

📧 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) | ✉ s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



OFFICIAL

From: Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 6:21 PM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: FW: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

I have just seen that I missed a call from you earlier today. I'm guessing it was to do with the below? Tom also gave me a heads up.

The team are working on a response – there are a lot of questions!

Happy to chat now/tomorrow.

Apologies that I missed you.

Cheers

Carmel

Carmel Curran

Assistant Secretary Communication and Media Branch
Enterprise Strategy and Governance Division

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Ngunnawal Country
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From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 5:37 PM
To: Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: FW: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

OFFICIAL

FYI – this is with ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)} for input

Thanks,
s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 1:14 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi team,

Hope you're well.

I'm working on a piece about the on-plant veterinarian program administered by the agriculture department.

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.
- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on "profound problems" they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to "chronic understaffing". The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:

- an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. "These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality," the complaint alleges. "It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors."
- a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were "profound problems" with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia's trade. "A culture of 'see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil' will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia's reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere," he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: "After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager's] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM's response was to reply 'I wish you hadn't told me that'. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV." He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. "In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner." The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a "cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal" in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: "I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant's Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly." The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to

the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: "The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."

- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.

- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:

- they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.

- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.

- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.

- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."

- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

My questions on this are:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
- why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?
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- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
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- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

My deadline for this is Wednesday COB.

Many thanks,

Christopher Knaus
Chief correspondent, investigations
The Guardian | Australia

+61 (0) 422 283 681
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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Curran, Carmel
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 8:50 PM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Ag Media; Wellington, Michelle
Subject: Re: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Sounds good.

Thanks

Carmel

OFFICIAL

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, March 24, 2025 8:48:57 PM
To: Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi Carmel

I have reached out to both legal and integrity, for their contribution where appropriate and guidance.

Once we have a plan tomorrow and all relevant parties have been briefed, I will brief upwards.

FYI we will also be preparing a BPB in preparation for Thursday.

I will send a meeting invite your way, feel free to forward onto anyone you would like to attend.

Cheers and speak tomorrow.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

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Carmel Curran

Assistant Secretary Communication and Media Branch
Enterprise Strategy and Governance Division

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
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A/Assistant Secretary
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Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

📧 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) | ✉ s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



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Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 6:21 PM
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I have just seen that I missed a call from you earlier today. I'm guessing it was to do with the below? Tom also gave me a heads up.

The team are working on a response – there are a lot of questions!

Happy to chat now/tomorrow.

Apologies that I missed you.

Cheers

Carmel

Carmel Curran
Assistant Secretary Communication and Media Branch
Enterprise Strategy and Governance Division

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Ngunnawal Country
Agriculture House, 70 Northbourne Ave, Canberra ACT 2600

Ph Mobile **s. 47F(1)** | Email carmel.curran1@aff.gov.au

www.agriculture.gov.au



We acknowledge the continuous connection of First Nations Traditional Owners and Custodians to the lands, seas and waters of Australia. We recognise their care for and cultivation of Country. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and recognise their knowledge and contribution to the productivity, innovation and sustainability of Australia's agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries.

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 5:37 PM
To: Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: FW: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

OFFICIAL

FYI – this is with **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** for input

Thanks,
s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>
Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 1:14 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi team,

Hope you're well.

I'm working on a piece about the on-plant veterinarian program administered by the agriculture department.

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.

- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on “profound problems” they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to “chronic understaffing”. The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:

- an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. “These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality,” the complaint alleges. “It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors.”

- a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were “profound problems” with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia’s trade. “A culture of ‘see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil’ will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia’s reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere,” he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: “After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager’s] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM’s response was to reply ‘I wish you hadn’t told me that’. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV.” He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. “In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner.” The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a “cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal” in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: “I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant’s Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly.” The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: “The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing

animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."

- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.

- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:

- they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.

- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.

- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.

- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."

- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

My questions on this are:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?

- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?

- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?

- why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?
- why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?
- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

My deadline for this is Wednesday COB.

Many thanks,

Christopher Knaus
Chief correspondent, investigations
The Guardian | Australia

+61 (0) 422 283 681
christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

twitter: @knausc

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 11:04 AM
To: Ag Media
Subject: ATT s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Proposed Guardian response
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response GM.docx

Morning all,

Attached a first crack at this Guardian response- changes are tracked to show ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)} where I've changed what he's provided. Once you've had a look ^{s. 22(1)(i)}, and then you ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)}, lets share with Carmel before going back tot ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)} et al.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
media@aff.gov.au
www.agriculture.gov.au



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

OFFICIAL: Sensitive

OFFICIAL: Sensitive

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 11:51 AM
To: Ag Media
Subject: RE: ATT **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** - Proposed Guardian response
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**.docx

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Happy with the changes, please progress to Carmel.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Media Officer | Media |
s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communication and Media Branch
Corporate and Business Division

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 11:15 AM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: ATT **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** - Proposed Guardian response

OFFICIAL

Hi **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**

I've made only a very minor change to this. If you can take a look **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**?

s. 22(1)(

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 11:04 AM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: ATT ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)} - Proposed Guardian response

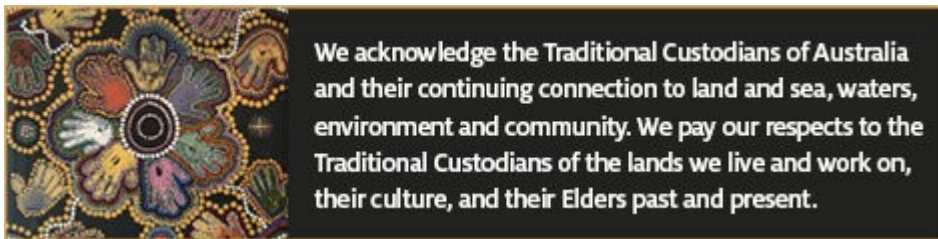
OFFICIAL

Morning all,

Attached a first crack at this Guardian response- changes are tracked to show ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)} where I've changed what he's provided. Once you've had a look ^{s. 22(1)(i)}, and then you ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)}, lets share with Carmel before going back tot ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)} et al.

^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)}

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)}
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
media@aff.gov.au
www.agriculture.gov.au



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S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

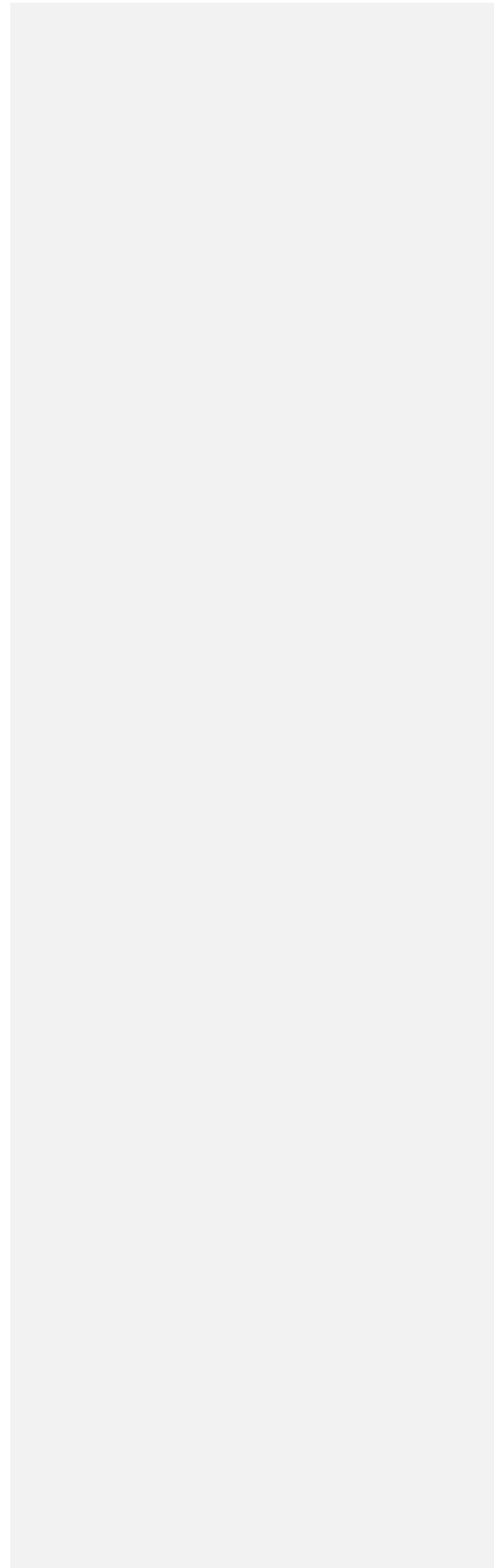
S. 47E(d)

s. 47E(d)

OFFICIAL: Sensitive

|

OFFICIAL: Sensitive



s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Curran, Carmel
Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 4:17 PM
To: Ag Media
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: RE: MEDIA RESPONSE FOR REVIEW - Guardian OPV enquiry
[SEC=OFFICIAL:Sensitive]
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response GM EB JB.docx
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

A few comments in track

Thanks

Carmel

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 12:10 PM
To: Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: MEDIA RESPONSE FOR REVIEW - Guardian OPV enquiry

OFFICIAL

Hi Carmel

Please find attached for your review the media team's suggested edits to the line area's proposed response to the Guardian OPV enquiry.

If you're able to review, we can send this back to AS s. 22(1)(a)(ii) team for checking and then get further clearances in train.

I also wanted to confirm the additional clearances required for this – in addition to the line area, s. 22(1)(a)(ii) mentioned General Counsel Jadd Sanson-Fisher and legal, COP Tim Simpson and Tess, if there are any others?

Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns.

Kind regards,
s. 22(1)(a)(ii) she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

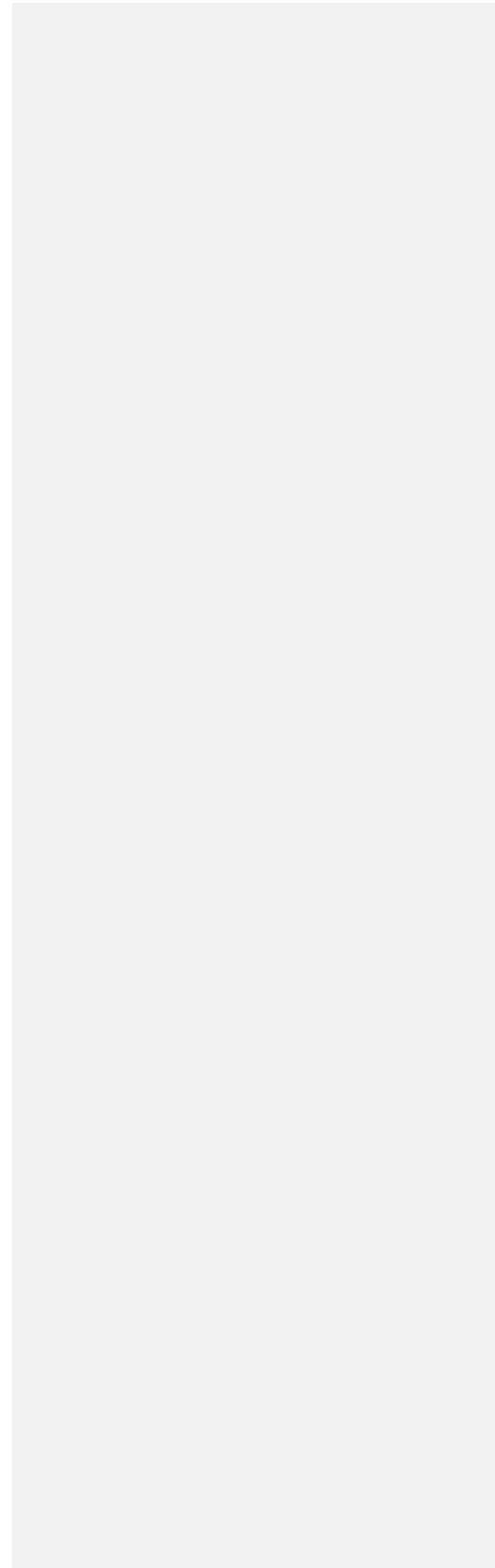
S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

OFFICIAL: Sensitive

|

OFFICIAL: Sensitive



s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Wednesday, 26 March 2025 10:48 PM
To: Ag Media; Lysons-Smith, Shane; Curran, Carmel; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Way, Dennis; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Thank you for seeking an extension and acknowledge the renewed timeline of tomorrow.

Quick update on the back of this, since we will not be providing a response prior to estimates, we will hold back with the BPB.

The responses against each of the questions, for the most part, are now finalised. There is still a few updates which I have left comments within. [20250324 - Media Request - OPVs and AW.docx](#)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) if you are able to start lifting this up into appropriate media language/statement, it would be greatly appreciated.

Thanks again

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
 Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

📧 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) | ✉ s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

**OFFICIAL**

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Wednesday, 26 March 2025 4:53 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>

Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Subject: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference

OFFICIAL

Greetings s. 22(1)(a)(ii) and team,

I just wanted to check in on the media response to this enquiry and – many apologies - to let you know that we'll need to shift the deadline to lunchtime Thursday, due to the need for legal and further FAS and Dep Sec clearances required for this.

I can see that the shared response document has been further populated – I'm not sure if you have more content to come before then?

If you are able to get this to the media team by noon Thursday, we can review and then begin these further clearances.

Thank you for all your work on this and please let us know if you have any comments or concerns.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Tuesday, 25 March 2025 12:56 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>

Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Subject: RE: Previous media q and response for reference

OFFICIAL

Hi all,

I just wanted to confirm that I've contacted the journalist and he's agreed to a later deadline of Monday COB (so we'd need to have a response ready to go up to the MO for final clearance by approx 2pm Monday).

Please let me know if you have any issues or concerns and thank you.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 47E(d), s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 47E(d)

s. 47E(d), s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

S. 47E (d)

Background

For context, the reporter has provided the below as background to this request:

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

The Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.

- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on “profound problems” they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to “chronic understaffing”. The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:

- an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. “These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality,” the complaint alleges. “It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors.”

- a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were “profound problems” with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia’s trade. “A culture of ‘see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil’ will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia’s reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere,” he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: “After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager’s] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM’s response was to reply ‘I wish you hadn’t told me that’. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV.” He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. “In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner.” The

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PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a “cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal” in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: “I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant’s Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly.” The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: “The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV.”

- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not “disclosable conduct”, meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.

- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:

- they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.
- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.

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OFFICIAL

- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.
- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."

- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

If you could please have a response to us by 1pm Wednesday, that would be much appreciated.

Please let me know if you have any comments or concerns.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 4:52 PM
To: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** ; Ag Media
Cc: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**; Way, Dennis; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**; Lysons-Smith, Shane; Curran, Carmel; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd
Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL]
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response - media edits.docx

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Hi **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**

Thank you for sending this through and for turning it around so quickly.

The media team has reviewed the response and has made suggestions in tracked changes.

We've opted to go for direct answers in lieu of a statement as given the specific and detailed questions and background material we believe that this response would be better served by direct answers.

If you could please review and add in any changes and additional material and then get this back to us, we can send it on for further clearance by Shane and Jadd, before getting it back to you for clearance.

If you could have this back to us by 1230pm Friday, that would be much appreciated.

Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns.

Kind regards,
s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL


From: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** @aff.gov.au>
Sent: Wednesday, 26 March 2025 10:48 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>
Cc: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** @aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii) if you are able to start lifting this up into appropriate media language/statement, it would be greatly appreciated.

Thanks again

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) |  s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au



Australian Government

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



OFFICIAL

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Tuesday, 25 March 2025 12:56 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <[s. 22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

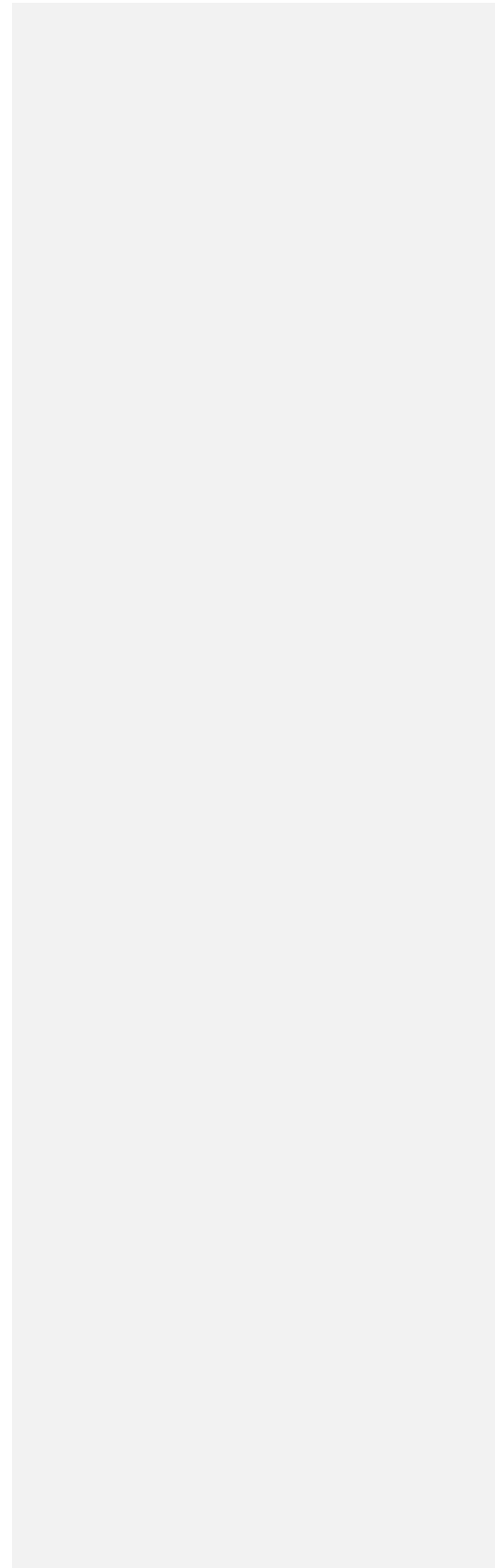
S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

OFFICIAL: Sensitive

|

OFFICIAL: Sensitive



s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 6:55 PM
To: Curran, Carmel
Cc: Ag Media
Subject: Re: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Hi Carmel,

We're just going to run the changes by the line area before it goes to legal and people tomorrow.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

OFFICIAL

From: Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, March 27, 2025 6:51:23 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi

Has this gone to legal and people?

Thanks

Carmel

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 4:52 PM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) s. 22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

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Australian Government

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From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Friday, 28 March 2025 12:36 PM
To: Ag Media
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Way, Dennis; s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Lysons-Smith, Shane; Curran, Carmel; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd
Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL:Sensitive]
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response - media edits.docx
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Hi Team

Updated version attached, appreciate if you can include Tom Black in the approval process.

Thanks and any questions reach out.

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A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
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A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

S. 47E(d)

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Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL:Sensitive]
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response - media edits.docx
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S. 47E(d)

s. 47E(d)

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S. 47E(d)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Friday, 28 March 2025 1:11 PM
To: Ag Media; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Lysons-Smith, Shane
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Way, Dennis; s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Lysons-Smith, Shane; Curran, Carmel; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY - Due COB today - OPV program
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response - media edits LA.docx; Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

s. 42(1), s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Kind regards,
s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)
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Communications and Media Branch
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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

📧 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) | ✉ s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au



Australian Government

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Thursday, 27 March 2025 4:52 PM

To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>

Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii),

Thank you for sending this through and for turning it around so quickly.

The media team has reviewed the response and has made suggestions in tracked changes.

We've opted to go for direct answers in lieu of a statement as given the specific and detailed questions and background material we believe that this response would be better served by direct answers.

If you could please review and add in any changes and additional material and then get this back to us, we can send it on for further clearance by Shane and Jadd, before getting it back to you for clearance.

If you could have this back to us by 1230pm Friday, that would be much appreciated.

Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL


From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au
Sent: Wednesday, 26 March 2025 10:48 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) [s.22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)
Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL]

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Thank you for seeking an extension and acknowledge the renewed timeline of tomorrow.

Quick update on the back of this, since we will not be providing a response prior to estimates, we will hold back with the BPB.

The responses against each of the questions, for the most part, are now finalised. There is still a few updates which I have left comments within.  [20250324 - Media Request - OPVs and AW.docx](#)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) if you are able to start lifting this up into appropriate media language/statement, it would be greatly appreciated.

Thanks again

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) |  s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

**OFFICIAL**

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Wednesday, 26 March 2025 4:53 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <@aff.gov.au>
Subject: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference

OFFICIAL

Greetings s. 22(1)(a)(ii) and team,

I just wanted to check in on the media response to this enquiry and – many apologies - to let you know that we'll need to shift the deadline to lunchtime Thursday, due to the need for legal and further FAS and Dep Sec clearances required for this.

I can see that the shared response document has been further populated – I'm not sure if you have more content to come before then?

If you are able to get this to the media team by noon Thursday, we can review and then begin these further clearances.

Thank you for all your work on this and please let us know if you have any comments or concerns.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Tuesday, 25 March 2025 12:56 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: Previous media q and response for reference

OFFICIAL

Hi all,

I just wanted to confirm that I've contacted the journalist and he's agreed to a later deadline of Monday COB (so we'd need to have a response ready to go up to the MO for final clearance by approx 2pm Monday).

Please let me know if you have any issues or concerns and thank you.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1), s. 47F(1)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 42(1)

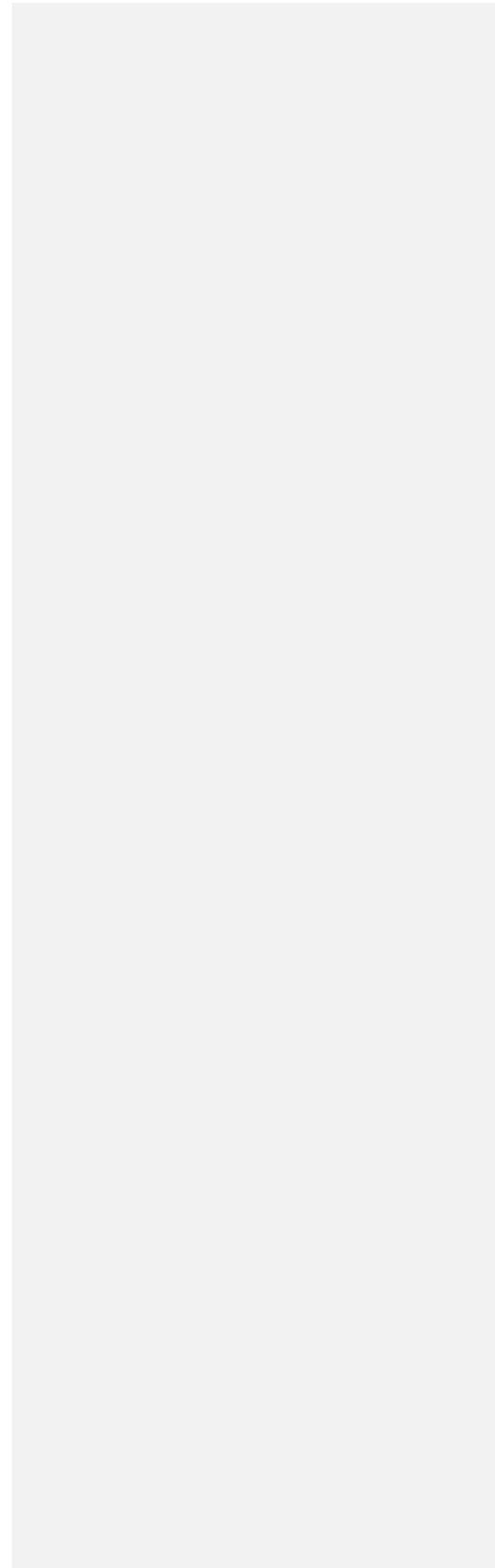
s. 42(1), s. 47E(d)

s. 42(1), s. 47E(d)

OFFICIAL: Sensitive

|

OFFICIAL: Sensitive



s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Lysons-Smith, Shane
Sent: Friday, 28 March 2025 6:08 PM
To: Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Ag Media
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Way, Dennis; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Curran, Carmel; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) ;
s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
s. 22(1)(i)
Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY - Due COB today - OPV program
[SEC=OFFICIAL:Sensitive]
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response - media edits LA - Legal comments - CPO
comments.docx
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Hi all

Please see attached with suggested edits to the responses related to the employee's complaint, PID and Ombudsman.

Happy to discuss if any concerns

Regards,
Shane

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1), s. 47F(1)

OFFICIAL

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au
Sent: Friday, 28 March 2025 12:36 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

<s. 22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: UPDATED GUARDIAN MEDIA ENQUIRY DEADLINE: Previous media q and response for reference [SEC=OFFICIAL:Sensitive]

OFFICIAL

Hi Team

Updated version attached, appreciate if you can include Tom Black in the approval process.

Thanks and any questions reach out.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

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Media

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Communications and Media Branch

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Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division

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Australian Government

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Communications and Media Branch
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Sent: Tuesday, 25 March 2025 12:56 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <[s.22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>
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Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

S. 42(1)

s. 42(1), s. 47E(d)

s. 42(1), s. 47E(d)

s. 42(1), s. 47E(d)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 10:49 AM
To: Wellington, Michelle; Mulhearn, Christine
Cc: Ag Media; Black, Tom; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) ; Sanson - Fisher, Jadd; Lysons-Smith, Shane; Simpson, Tim; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) ; Curran, Carmel; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 1pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian
Attachments: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program; Guardian Q's Draft response - media edits LA - Legal comments - CPO comments - media.docx
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Good morning Michelle and Christine,

We've received a media enquiry regarding on-plant veterinarians working inside export-licensed abattoirs.

The **Guardian's chief investigative reporter Christopher Kaus** would like to know^{**}:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above? (see below)
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
- why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?
- why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?
- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

I have attached a copy of the original inquiry for background also.

Please find attached our proposed response.

This was cleared on Friday by Meat Exports AS s. 22(1)(a)(ii) General Counsel Jadd Sanson-Fisher and acting Chief of People Shane Lysons-Smith.

If you could please review and approve with any edits or comments and get this back to us by 1pm today, we can progress to COO Tess Bishop for clearance. Apologies for the short timeframe.

We are looking to get this back to the journalist by COB today.

Please let me know if you have any comments or concerns.

****For context, the reporter has provided the below as background to this request:**

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.
- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on “profound problems” they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to “chronic understaffing”. The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:
 - an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. “These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality,” the complaint alleges. “It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors.”
 - a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were “profound problems” with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia’s trade. “A culture of ‘see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil’ will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia’s reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere,” he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: “After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager’s] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM’s response was to reply ‘I wish you hadn’t told me that’. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV.” He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. “In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner.” The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a “cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal” in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: “I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant’s Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly.” The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his

PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: "The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."
- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.
- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:
 - they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.
- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.
- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.
- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."
- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Mulhearn, Christine
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 1:22 PM
To: Ag Media
Cc: Ag Media; Black, Tom; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Sanson - Fisher, Jadd; Lysons-Smith, Shane; Simpson, Tim; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Curran, Carmel; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Wellington, Michelle; Way, Dennis
Subject: FW: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 1pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL:Sensitive]
Attachments: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program; Guardian Q's Draft response - media edits LA - Legal comments - CPO comments - media.docx
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

I am broadly comfortable however there are a couple of areas that I think need nuance. I have made some changes in track.

Christine

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 10:49 AM
To: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Black, Tom <Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
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- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

I have attached a copy of the original inquiry for background also.

Please find attached our proposed response.

This was cleared on Friday by Meat Exports AS s. 22(1)(a)(ii) , General Counsel Jadd Sanson-Fisher and acting Chief of People Shane Lysons-Smith.

If you could please review and approve with any edits or comments and get this back to us by 1pm today, we can progress to COO Tess Bishop for clearance. Apologies for the short timeframe.

We are looking to get this back to the journalist by COB today.

Please let me know if you have any comments or concerns.

^{**}For context, the reporter has provided the below as background to this request:

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.
- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on "profound problems" they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to "chronic understaffing". The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:
 - an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. "These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do

not reflect reality,” the complaint alleges. “It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors.”

- a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were “profound problems” with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia’s trade. “A culture of ‘see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil’ will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia’s reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere,” he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: “After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager’s] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM’s response was to reply ‘I wish you hadn’t told me that’. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV.” He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. “In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner.” The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a “cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal” in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: “I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant’s Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly.” The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.
- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: “The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV.”
- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not “disclosable conduct”, meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.
- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:
 - they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they

frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.

- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.
- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.
- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."
- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 2:32 PM
To: Wellington, Michelle; Ag Media
Cc: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 1pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response - media edits LA - Legal comments - CPO comments - media.docx

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Thanks very much Michelle.

If it helps these are the changes acting FAS Christine Mulhearn has recommended also (see attached – she has been clearing concurrently).

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 2:24 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Cc: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** @aff.gov.au; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** @aff.gov.au
Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 1pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi ^{s. 22(1)(i)}, sorry, I've been in back to backs and will look now.

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 12:37 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>
Cc: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** @aff.gov.au; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** @aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

Media
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above? (see below)
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
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- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
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Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 3:31 PM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Ag Media; Mulhearn, Christine
Cc: Black, Tom; s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Lysons-Smith, Shane; Simpson, Tim; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Curran, Carmel; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Way, Dennis; Wellington, Michelle
Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 330pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Thank you s. 22(1)(a)(ii) and team for turning this around so quickly.

We will progress.

Kind regards,
 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
 Communications and Media Branch
 P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 3:28 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Black, Tom <Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 330pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Christine and EVSD are agreed to move this forward with Michelle's additions. s. 47E(d)

Regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 3:11 PM

To: Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Black, Tom <Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane

<Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; Wellington, Michelle

<Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>

Subject: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 330pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL:Sensitive]

OFFICIAL

Hi Christine and team,

We're about to go up to Tess with this for final clearance (to meet the final deadline of COB today).

Could you please let us know by 330pm today if you're OK with Michelle's edits? (see attached)

We will need to progress then.

Many thanks!

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 2:39 PM

To: Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Black, Tom <Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>;

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>

Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 1pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL:Sensitive]

OFFICIAL

HI all

Some suggested track changes/comments attached. Happy to discuss Christine.

Kind regards

Michelle Wellington PSM

Chief Strategy, Performance and Engagement Officer | First Assistant Secretary | s. 47F(1)

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Strategy, Performance and Engagement Division | Strategy, Enterprise and Engagement Group
Brisbane Regional Office, 42-44 Qantas Drive, Eagle Farm, Queensland, 4000
GPO Box 858, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia

We work flexibly at DAFF. If you have received an email from me outside of normal business hours, I'm sending it at a time that suits me. I'm not expecting you to read or reply until normal business hours.

agriculture.gov.au



We acknowledge the continuous connection of First Nations Traditional Owners and Custodians to the lands, seas and waters of Australia. We recognise their care for and cultivation of Country. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and recognise their knowledge and contribution to the productivity, innovation and sustainability of Australia's agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries.

OFFICIAL

From: Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 12:22 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Black, Tom <Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>;

Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane

<Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>

Subject: FW: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 1pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licensed abattoirs - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL:Sensitive]

OFFICIAL

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii),

I am broadly comfortable however there are a couple of areas that I think need nuance. I have made some changes in track.

Christine

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 10:49 AM

To: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>

Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Black, Tom <Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane

<Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Subject: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL: Due 1pm today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licensed abattoirs - The Guardian

OFFICIAL

Good morning Michelle and Christine,

We've received a media enquiry regarding on-plant veterinarians working inside export-licensed abattoirs.

The **Guardian's chief investigative reporter Christopher Kaus** would like to know^{**}:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above? (see below)
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
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- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

I have attached a copy of the original inquiry for background also.

Please find attached our proposed response.

This was cleared on Friday by Meat Exports AS s. 22(1)(a)(ii) General Counsel Jadd Sanson-Fisher and acting Chief of People Shane Lysons-Smith.

If you could please review and approve with any edits or comments and get this back to us by 1pm today, we can progress to COO Tess Bishop for clearance. Apologies for the short timeframe.

We are looking to get this back to the journalist by COB today.

Please let me know if you have any comments or concerns.

****For context, the reporter has provided the below as background to this request:**

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.
- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on “profound problems” they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to “chronic understaffing”. The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:
 - an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. “These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality,” the complaint alleges. “It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors.”
 - a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were “profound problems” with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia’s trade. “A culture of ‘see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil’ will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia’s reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere,” he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare

incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: “After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager’s] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM’s response was to reply ‘I wish you hadn’t told me that’. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV.” He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. “In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner.” The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a “cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal” in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: “I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant’s Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly.” The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: "The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."
- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.
- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:
 - they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.
- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.

- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.
- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."
- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Wellington, Michelle
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 4:30 PM
To: Ag Media
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Curran, Carmel
Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL - Due 5pm today: on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Thanks s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Please proceed with the response to the Guardian and email a copy to s. 47F(1) and s. 47F(1) as an FYI, cc me in please.

Kind regards

Michelle Wellington PSM

Chief Strategy, Performance and Engagement Officer | First Assistant Secretary | s. 47F(1)

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Strategy, Performance and Engagement Division | Strategy, Enterprise and Engagement Group
Brisbane Regional Office, 42-44 Qantas Drive, Eagle Farm, Queensland, 4000
GPO Box 858, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia

We work flexibly at DAFF. If you have received an email from me outside of normal business hours, I'm sending it at a time that suits me. I'm not expecting you to read or reply until normal business hours.

agriculture.gov.au



We acknowledge the continuous connection of First Nations Traditional Owners and Custodians to the lands, seas and waters of Australia. We recognise their care for and cultivation of Country. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and recognise their knowledge and contribution to the productivity, innovation and sustainability of Australia's agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries.

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 3:05 PM
To: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Subject: FW: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL - Due 5pm today: on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian

OFFICIAL

Apologies for missing you in this Michelle!

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au

Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 3:35 PM

To: Bishop, Tess <Tess.Bishop@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au

Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Black, Tom <Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane

<Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>

Subject: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR APPROVAL - Due 5pm today: on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - The Guardian

OFFICIAL

Good afternoon Tess and team,

We've received a media enquiry regarding on-plant veterinarians working inside export-licensed abattoirs.

The **Guardian's chief investigative reporter Christopher Kaus** would like to know^{**}:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above? (see below)
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
- why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?
- why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?

- what action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?
- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

I have attached a copy of the original inquiry for background also.

Please find attached our proposed response.

This has been cleared by FAS Michelle Wellington and acting FAS Christine Mulhearn today and on Friday by Meat Exports AS s. 22(1)(a)(ii) General Counsel Jadd Sanson-Fisher and acting Chief of People Shane Lysons-Smith.

If you could please review and approve with any edits or comments and get this back to us 5pm today, that would be much appreciated. Apologies for the short timeframe.

We are looking to get this back to the journalist by COB today.

Please let me know if you have any comments or concerns.

****For context, the reporter has provided the below as background to this request:**

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.
- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on "profound problems" they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to "chronic understaffing". The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:
 - an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. "These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality," the complaint alleges. "It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors."
 - a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were "profound problems" with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia's trade. "A culture of 'see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil' will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia's reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere," he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff

from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: “After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager’s] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM’s response was to reply ‘I wish you hadn’t told me that’. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV.” He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. “In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner.” The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a “cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal” in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: “I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant’s Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly.” The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: "The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."
- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.
- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:
 - they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.
- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.
- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.

- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."
- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 5:12 PM
To: s. 47F(1) (Treasury); s. 47F(1)
Cc: Ag Media; Wellington, Michelle; Curran, Carmel
Subject: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOR INFO: on plant veterinarians working inside export-licensed abattoirs - The Guardian
Attachments: Guardian Q's Draft response - media edits LA - Legal comments - CPO comments - media - mw comments - CM comments.docx
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Good afternoon s. 47F(1) and s. 47F(1)

We've received a media enquiry regarding on-plant veterinarians working inside export-licensed abattoirs. Please see attached our response to the inquiry below, for your information only.

The **Guardian's chief investigative reporter Christopher Kaus** would like to know^{**}:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above? (see below)
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
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- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?
- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

^{**}For context, the reporter has provided the below as background to this request:

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.

- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on “profound problems” they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to “chronic understaffing”. The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:
 - an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. “These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality,” the complaint alleges. “It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors.”
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Thanks,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

What is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?

- The department rejects the statement made by the Guardian about its integrity in performing its regulatory responsibilities at export meat establishments. The department works cooperatively with State/Territory counterparts to investigate animal welfare complaints in accordance with relevant legislation.
- Export-registered establishments are primarily responsible for identifying and actively managing animal welfare incidents in accordance with the *Australian Meat Standard for the Hygienic Production and Transportation of Meat and Meat Products for Human Consumption* (AS4696:2023) and any state/territory legislative requirements.
- The department ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken to address non-compliance with export control legislation.
- Export-registered establishments must also comply with state/territory animal welfare legislation and are required to follow direction given by the department to assist state/territory governments to investigate animal welfare incidents.

What is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?

- Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV.
- The department requires 110 OPVs to meet industry needs as per the Australian Export Meat Inspection System (AEMIS).
- The department currently has 162 OPVs employed across the department to ensure we can meet industry needs and allow for backfill for leave as required.

Why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?

- This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities.
- The department also ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken under the export control legislation where necessary.

- OPVs are encouraged to contact the department's senior veterinary technical managers for support in undertaking these actions if they need to do so.

Why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?

This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock.

Why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?

- All on plant staff are issued with secure departmental devices.
- There is no departmental restriction to using a departmental device to take photos provided every effort is made to comply with privacy legislation.

What action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?

- It is not appropriate for the department to comment on a complaint that may have been made to the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

What action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?

- All disclosures made under the *Public Interest Disclosure Act 2013* (PID Act) are investigated in accordance with legislative requirements. The PID Act provides certain protections to individuals who have made a disclosure under the Act or witnesses who provide assistance in relation to a disclosure made under the Act. As such, the department is not able to comment on matters related to any public interest disclosures.

What action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?

The safety of departmental employees is, and always has been, of paramount importance to the department. Staff may enter pens where there are appropriate controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock.

How does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?

- The department rejects the statement made by the Guardian that it is inherently conflicted in performing its regulatory responsibilities at export meat establishments.
- The department has a robust regulatory framework and takes regulatory action, where appropriate, for breaches of animal welfare requirements.

Does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

- The department has been made aware of the recent video footage collected by the Farm Transparency Project alleging poor animal welfare outcomes at one (1) export registered abattoir in Queensland. The department is considering the material from the FTP website and cannot provide comment on an active investigation.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 3:17 PM
To: Ag Media; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) ; Simpson, Tim; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd
Cc: Wellington, Michelle; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Curran, Carmel; s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Mulhearn, Christine; Black, Tom; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Lysons-Smith, Shane; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOLLOW UP: Due COB today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian

Good afternoon all,

In addition to below, the Guardian have added another question:

The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

- Diamond Valley Pork, Laverton VIC (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Tasmanian Quality Meats, Cressy TAS (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Ralph's Meats, Seymour VIC
- Game Meats Company, Eurobin VIC
- MD Foods, Echuca VIC
- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
media@aff.gov.au
www.agriculture.gov.au



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

From: Ag Media

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 11:48 AM

OFFICIAL

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We've had some follow-up questions from the Guardian and their enquiry regarding on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs (my apologies).

Investigative journalist Christopher Knaus asks below:

“We just wanted to put some follow-up questions to the department for further clarity on a few points. Also, I should note these are not statements made by the Guardian. They are being made by OPVs, former and current, in formalised internal and external complaints.

The follow up questions are below in bold:

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

I've attached a copy of his original enquiry here for reference, as well as the full response that went back to him yesterday.

He's requested a deadline of tomorrow afternoon, but this may be a bit ambitious given current caretaker requirements etc.

If you can come back to us by COB today with a response, we can initiate further clearances.

Apologies again and thanks for all your work on this.

Please let me know if you have any comments or concerns.

Kind regards,
s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 8:57 AM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) ; Ag Media; Simpson, Tim; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Way, Dennis
Cc: Wellington, Michelle; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) ; Curran, Carmel; s. 22(1)(a)(ii); Mulhearn, Christine; Black, Tom; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) ; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Lysons-Smith, Shane; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOLLOW UP: Due COB today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

OFFICIAL

Thank you s. 22(1)(a)(ii).

Just following up on the other three questions sent through yesterday (see below).

Kind regards,
 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)
Media
 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
 Communications and Media Branch
 P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 8:19 AM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>; Black, Tom <Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOLLOW UP: Due COB today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Morning all

I can confirm that the department has received complaints from FTP for all seven export registered meat establishments listed. In receiving these complaints, the department initiated regulatory activity, in response to each individual report.

Regards

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) |  s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au



Australian Government

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 4:40 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>

Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>; Black, Tom

<Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane

<Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOLLOW UP: Due COB today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian

OFFICIAL

Apologies – including Dennis in this.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 3:17 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>

Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Curran, Carmel <Carmel.Curran1@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>; Black, Tom <Tom.Black@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Lysons-Smith, Shane <Shane.Lysons-Smith@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Subject: RE: MEDIA ENQUIRY FOLLOW UP: Due COB today - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian

OFFICIAL

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In addition to below, the Guardian have added another question:

The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

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- Game Meats Company, Eurobin VIC
- MD Foods, Echuca VIC
- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
media@aff.gov.au
www.agriculture.gov.au



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OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 11:48 AM

OFFICIAL

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We've had some follow-up questions from the Guardian and their enquiry regarding on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs (my apologies).

Investigative journalist Christopher Knaus asks below:

"We just wanted to put some follow-up questions to the department for further clarity on a few points. Also, I should note these are not statements made by the Guardian. They are being made by OPVs, former and current, in formalised internal and external complaints.

The follow up questions are below in bold:

S. 47E(d)

S. 47E(d)

I've attached a copy of his original enquiry here for reference, as well as the full response that went back to him yesterday.

He's requested a deadline of tomorrow afternoon, but this may be a bit ambitious given current caretaker requirements etc.

If you can come back to us by COB today with a response, we can initiate further clearances.

Apologies again and thanks for all your work on this.

Please let me know if you have any comments or concerns.

Kind regards,
s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Communications and Media Branch
P: 02 6272 3232 | E: media@aff.gov.au

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 5:43 PM
To: Mulhearn, Christine; Ag Media; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Simpson, Tim; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Cc: Wellington, Michelle; Way, Dennis
Subject: RE: FOR CLEAREANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Thanks Christine. If we could have this done pre 9am tomorrow that'd be ideal.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

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Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
media@aff.gov.au
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From: Mulhearn, Christine
Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 2:28 PM
To: Ag Media ; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd ; Simpson, Tim ; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Cc: Wellington, Michelle ; Way, Dennis
Subject: RE: FOR CLEAREANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi team,

I think these need a fair bit of finessing. Ill do some crafting and come back to everyone. Tim and Jadd please wait until I recraft for your review.

Christine

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 2:10 PM
To: Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>;

Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licensed abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Good afternoon Jadd, Tim and Christine,

Hoping to have the following cleared by each of you in time to meet our deadline tomorrow. At the moment Q2 is unanswered- will send that through as soon as it's provided. Could we have your feedback on the rest by COB please?

s. 47E(d)

s. 47E(d)

I have attached our response returned in response to this reporter's initial questions and his initial enquiry (which contains further background).

Please let us know if you have any comments or concerns.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | 0403 701 945
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
media@aff.gov.au
www.agriculture.gov.au



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OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 8:07 AM
To: Mulhearn, Christine; Ag Media; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Simpson, Tim; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**,
s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Wellington, Michelle; Way, Dennis; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Subject: RE: FOR CLEAREANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Many thanks Christine.

Jadd and Tim, can we have your feedback by midday please?

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
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www.agriculture.gov.au



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From: Mulhearn, Christine
Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 7:01 PM
To: Ag Media ; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd ; Simpson, Tim ; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Cc: Wellington, Michelle ; Way, Dennis ; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Subject: RE: FOR CLEAREANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi All,

I have redrafted the responses for review. The new responses are in blue.

Christine

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S. 47E(d)

s. 47E(d)

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Please let us know if you have any comments or concerns.

OFFICIAL

From: Mulhearn, Christine

Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 2:28 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>

Subject: RE: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

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Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 2:10 PM

To: Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

media@aff.gov.au

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 9:58 AM
To: Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Mulhearn, Christine; Ag Media; Simpson, Tim; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Wellington, Michelle; Way, Dennis; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: RE: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Many thanks Jadd.

Tim, once you're happy let us know and we'll progress to dep secs.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
media@aff.gov.au
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s. 42(1)

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From: Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 7:01 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au>

Subject: RE: FOR CLEAREANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

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s. 47E(d)

Response: s. 42(1)

s. 47E(d)

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OFFICIAL

From: Mulhearn, Christine

Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 2:28 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** @aff.gov.au>

Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>

Subject: RE: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

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Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2025 2:10 PM

To: Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <@aff.gov.au>

Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

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Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
media@aff.gov.au
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OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 1:27 PM
To: Wellington, Michelle
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) ; Ag Media
Subject: FW: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian DUE COB - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Hi Michelle,

As you've seen, the Guardian sent through several follow up questions after our initial response to their OPV piece. The following answers have been prepared and cleared by meat exports, people services and legal. Could you have a look before we send on to Tess for final tick?

S. 47E(d)

s. 47E(d)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | [s. 22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)](#)

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

media@aff.gov.au

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 3:59 PM
To: Way, Dennis; Ag Media; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** ; Simpson, Tim; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Mulhearn, Christine
Cc: Wellington, Michelle; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** Curran, Carmel; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**; Black, Tom; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)** Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Lysons-Smith, Shane; **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Subject: For info- final response to the Guardian Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi all,

For info, our response to the Guardian has been provided as per below. Many thanks for your effort and patience on this.

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 3:54 PM
To: Christopher Knaus ; Ag Media
Subject: RE: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

OFFICIAL

Good afternoon Christopher,

Thanks for your patience. The following answers can be attributed to a departmental spokesperson.

The department says: "Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV". The 2019 Ombudsman complaint, made by roughly half the permanent OPV staff in NSW, explicitly stated that "For Instance, it is an accepted VEMS practice to have OPVs cover two establishments in the one day, leave establishments with no OPV for periods of greater than two days, and/or chronically understaff establishments by replacing OPVs with FSMAs. Some establishments in NSW have been without vets for 20 or more days in a year. This is not reflected in the OPV roster, which is published by VEMS weekly, but is not always reflective of what actually happens on plant." - **Are you saying that the situation has improved since 2019? Or that the ombudsman complaint is wrong?**

Response: The department rosters OPVs to service industry demand and ensures that it satisfies overseas market access requirements. Regulatory oversight is maintained at establishments as needed. The department has developed its on plant staffing model (both OPVs and Food Safety Meat Assessors) over time and continues to recruit on plant staff as required.

The department says: "This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities." The OPVs we have spoken to have said they are no longer able to directly write and submit welfare complaints of their own volition to state regulators. They say they are restricted only to overseeing the abattoir's self-reporting and that, if

this doesn't occur, they often don't have the backing of their superiors, including technical managers, to take it further - **Is the department saying this is not true?**

Response: As part of their regulatory role within establishments, OPVs can and do write and submit welfare incident reports that may then be investigated by the regulator responsible (which is usually the relevant state or territory where the abattoir is located).

The department says: "This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock." The OPVs we have spoken to say the WHS controls introduced by the department relate to ensuring animals are restrained before entering a pen. They say this is impossible in practice because most abattoirs do not have the facilities or resources to ensure animals are restrained for ante mortem inspections. This makes it an effective ban on entering pens - **Does the department dispute this? What level of restraint do the animals need to be under before an OPV can enter the pen? How many livestock handlers are needed and at what ratio to livestock?**

Response: The Department has a WHS obligation to ensure that all staff have access to a safe working environment, this includes undertaking ante mortem inspection safely. Establishments are required to support departmental staff in undertaking ante mortem inspections while ensuring the delivery of effective animal welfare outcomes without jeopardising staff safety. The WHS controls for ante mortem can be physical (barrier/fencing/walk over) and includes the assistance of an establishment stock handler to assist in the separation of livestock within the pen. The number of stock handlers needs to be sufficient (minimum of one) to address the volume and type of livestock, e.g. cattle or sheep, and the physical layout of the livestock pen.

The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

- Diamond Valley Pork, Laverton VIC (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Tasmanian Quality Meats, Cressy TAS (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Ralph's Meats, Seymour VIC
- Game Meats Company, Eurobin VIC
- MD Foods, Echuca VIC
- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

Response: The department has received these complaints and has reviewed in line with its regulatory obligations at export registered establishments.

All the best,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

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Communications and Media Branch
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OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 3:12 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Re: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

That's fine, thanks [s. 22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)](#)

And just one more question sorry. The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

- Diamond Valley Pork, Laverton VIC (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Tasmanian Quality Meats, Cressy TAS (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Ralph's Meats, Seymour VIC
- Game Meats Company, Eurobin VIC
- MD Foods, Echuca VIC
- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations
The Guardian | Australia

+61 (0) 422 283 681

christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

twitter: @knausc

On Tue, 1 Apr 2025 at 13:56, Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Hi Chris,

Thank you for sending these through and we're actioning a response for you.

Caretaker conventions, however, have affected our internal processes - impacting our response times - and we're likely to need until Thursday to get this back to you.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

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OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 11:15 AM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Re: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Thanks again to you and the team for the comprehensive response.

We just wanted to put some follow-up questions to the department for further clarity on a few points. Also, I should note these are not statements made by the Guardian. They are being made by OPVs, former and current, in formalised internal and external complaints.

The follow up questions are below in bold:

1) The department says: "Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV". The 2019 Ombudsman complaint, made by roughly half the permanent OPV staff in NSW, explicitly stated that "For Instance, it is an accepted VEMS practice to have OPVs cover two establishments in the one day, leave establishments with no OPV for periods of greater than two days, and/or chronically understaff establishments by replacing OPVs with FSMAs. Some establishments in NSW have been without vets for 20 or more days in a year. This is not reflected in the OPV roster, which is published by VEMS weekly, but is not always reflective of what actually happens on plant." - **Are you saying that the situation has improved since 2019? Or that the ombudsman complaint is wrong?**

2) The department says: "This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities." The OPVs we have spoken to have said they are no longer able to directly write and submit welfare complaints of their own volition to state regulators. They say they are restricted only to overseeing the abattoir's self-reporting and that, if this doesn't occur, they often don't have the backing of their superiors, including technical managers, to take it further - **Is the department saying this is not true?**

3) The department says: "This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock." The OPVs we have spoken to say the WHS controls introduced by the department relate to ensuring animals are restrained before entering a pen. They say this is impossible in practice because most abattoirs do not have the facilities or resources to ensure animals are restrained for ante mortem inspections. This makes it an effective ban on entering pens - **Does the department dispute this? What level of restraint do the animals need to be under before an OPV can enter the pen? How many livestock handlers are needed and at what ratio to livestock?**

It'd be great to get a response to these follow-up questions by 3pm Wednesday.

Thanks again.

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations

The Guardian | Australia

+61 (0) 422 283 681

christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

twitter: @knausc

On Mon, 31 Mar 2025 at 17:32, Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com> wrote:

Thanks ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)} appreciate it.

Christopher Knaus
Chief investigations correspondent
Guardian Australia
m: 0422283681
e: christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

On Mon, 31 Mar 2025, 5:11 pm Ag Media, <Media@aff.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Hi Christopher,

Thank you for your patience. Please see our response below:

What is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?

- The department rejects the statement made by the Guardian about its integrity in performing its regulatory responsibilities at export meat establishments. The department works cooperatively with State/Territory counterparts to investigate animal welfare complaints in accordance with relevant legislation.
- Export-registered establishments are primarily responsible for identifying and actively managing animal welfare incidents in accordance with the *Australian Meat Standard for the Hygienic Production and Transportation of Meat and Meat Products for Human Consumption* (AS4696:2023) and any state/territory legislative requirements.
- The department ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken to address non-compliance with export control legislation.
- Export-registered establishments must also comply with state/territory animal welfare legislation and are required to follow direction given by the department to assist state/territory governments to investigate animal welfare incidents.

What is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?

- Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV.
- The department requires 110 OPVs to meet industry needs as per the Australian Export Meat Inspection System (AEMIS).
- The department currently has 162 OPVs employed across the department to ensure we can meet industry needs and allow for backfill for leave as required.

Why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?

- This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities.
- The department also ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken under the export control legislation where necessary.
- OPVs are encouraged to contact the department's senior veterinary technical managers for support in undertaking these actions if they need to do so.

Why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?

- This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock.

Why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?

- All on plant staff are issued with secure departmental devices.
- There is no departmental restriction to using a departmental device to take photos provided every effort is made to comply with privacy legislation.

What action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?

- It is not appropriate for the department to comment on a complaint that may have been made to the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

What action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?

- All disclosures made under the *Public Interest Disclosure Act 2013* (PID Act) are investigated in accordance with legislative requirements. The PID Act provides certain protections to individuals who have made a disclosure under the Act or witnesses who provide assistance in relation to a disclosure made under the Act. As such, the department is not able to comment on matters related to any public interest disclosures.

What action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?

- The safety of departmental employees is, and always has been, of paramount importance to the department. Staff may enter pens where there are appropriate controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock.

How does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?

- The department rejects the statement made by the Guardian that it is inherently conflicted in performing its regulatory responsibilities at export meat establishments.
- The department has a robust regulatory framework and takes regulatory action, where appropriate, for breaches of animal welfare requirements.

Does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

- The department has been made aware of the recent video footage collected by the Farm Transparency Project alleging poor animal welfare outcomes at one (1) export registered abattoir in Queensland. The department is considering the material from the FTP website and cannot provide comment on an active investigation.

Thanks,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

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OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 1:14 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi team,

Hope you're well.

I'm working on a piece about the on-plant veterinarian program administered by the agriculture department.

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.
- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on “profound problems” they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to “chronic understaffing”. The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:
 - an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. “These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality,” the complaint alleges. “It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors.”
 - a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were “profound problems” with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia’s trade. “A culture of ‘see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil’ will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia’s reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere,” he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: “After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager’s] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM’s response was to reply ‘I wish you hadn’t told me that’. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV.” He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. “In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner.” The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a “cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal” in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: “I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant’s Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly.” The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder,

according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: "The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."

- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.

- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:

- they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.

- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.

- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.

- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."

- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

My questions on this are:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
- why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?
- why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?
- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

My deadline for this is Wednesday COB.

Many thanks,

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations

The Guardian | Australia

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 4:26 PM
To: Wellington, Michelle; Ag Media
Subject: RE: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Standing by- let me know what you need on this.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Wellington, Michelle
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 4:02 PM
To: Ag Media
Subject: Re: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

I'll call you ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)}

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, April 3, 2025 3:01:45 PM
To: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: RE: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Michelle, I've just sent it. Can reach out to the journo is req. Please advise asap.

OFFICIAL

From: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 4:00 PM
To: Bishop, Tess <Tess.Bishop@aff.gov.au>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <[s.22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: Re: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi media team

Please hold off on response until I come back to you shortly.

Michelle

OFFICIAL

From: Bishop, Tess <Tess.Bishop@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Thursday, April 3, 2025 2:45:03 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <[s. 22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Re: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi all I have made a change the the very last response and with this change I approve it going.

Thank you

Tess Bishop (She/Her)

Chief Operating Officer

Deputy Secretary Strategy, Enterprise and Engagement Group

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

A: GPO Box 858 Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

M: s. 47F(1)

Executive Assistant: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

[@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)

Phone: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Executive Officer: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

[@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)

Mobile: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

We work flexibly at DAFF. If you have received an email from me outside of normal business hours, I'm sending it at a time that suits me. I'm not expecting you to read or reply until normal business hours.

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Thursday, April 3, 2025 1:19 pm

To: Bishop, Tess <Tess.Bishop@aff.gov.au>

Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <[s. 22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>

Subject: FOR CLEARANCE- Response to the Guardian - on plant veterinarians working inside export-licenced abattoirs - Guardian [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Good afternoon Tess,

The Guardian has sent several follow up questions to our initial response on their OPV piece. The following answers have been prepared and cleared by meat exports, people services, legal & SPED. Could you review at your earliest please?

S. 47E(d)

s. 47E(d)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media Team | 02 6272 3232 | 0403 701 945

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

media@aff.gov.au

www.agriculture.gov.au



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Monday, 7 April 2025 1:11 PM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: Guardian Part II- FW: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

These are the follow ups- ^{s. 22(1)(i)} will send you the initial repsonse

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 3:54 PM
To: Christopher Knaus ; Ag Media
Subject: RE: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Good afternoon Christopher,

Thanks for your patience. The following answers can be attributed to a departmental spokesperson.

The department says: "Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV". The 2019 Ombudsman complaint, made by roughly half the permanent OPV staff in NSW, explicitly stated that "For Instance, it is an accepted VEMS practice to have OPVs cover two establishments in the one day, leave establishments with no OPV for periods of greater than two days, and/or chronically understaff establishments by replacing OPVs with FSMAs. Some establishments in NSW have been without vets for 20 or more days in a year. This is not reflected in the OPV roster, which is published by VEMS weekly, but is not always reflective of what actually happens on plant." - **Are you saying that the situation has improved since 2019? Or that the ombudsman complaint is wrong?**

Response: The department rosters OPVs to service industry demand and ensures that it satisfies overseas market access requirements. Regulatory oversight is maintained at establishments as needed. The department has developed its on plant staffing model (both OPVs and Food Safety Meat Assessors) over time and continues to recruit on plant staff as required.

The department says: "This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities." The OPVs we have spoken to have said they are no longer able to directly write and submit welfare complaints of their own volition to state regulators. They say they are restricted only to overseeing the abattoir's self-reporting and that, if this doesn't occur, they often don't have the backing of their superiors, including technical managers, to take it further - **Is the department saying this is not true?**

Response: As part of their regulatory role within establishments, OPVs can and do write and submit welfare incident reports that may then be investigated by the regulator responsible (which is usually the relevant state or territory where the abattoir is located).

The department says: "This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock." The OPVs we have spoken to say the WHS controls introduced by the department relate to ensuring animals are restrained before entering a pen. They say this is impossible in practice because most abattoirs do not have the facilities or

resources to ensure animals are restrained for ante mortem inspections. This makes it an effective ban on entering pens - **Does the department dispute this? What level of restraint do the animals need to be under before an OPV can enter the pen? How many livestock handlers are needed and at what ratio to livestock?**

Response: The Department has a WHS obligation to ensure that all staff have access to a safe working environment, this includes undertaking ante mortem inspection safely. Establishments are required to support departmental staff in undertaking ante mortem inspections while ensuring the delivery of effective animal welfare outcomes without jeopardising staff safety. The WHS controls for ante mortem can be physical (barrier/fencing/walk over) and includes the assistance of an establishment stock handler to assist in the separation of livestock within the pen. The number of stock handlers needs to be sufficient (minimum of one) to address the volume and type of livestock, e.g. cattle or sheep, and the physical layout of the livestock pen.

The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

- Diamond Valley Pork, Laverton VIC (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Tasmanian Quality Meats, Cressy TAS (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Ralph's Meats, Seymour VIC
- Game Meats Company, Eurobin VIC
- MD Foods, Echuca VIC
- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

Response: The department has received these complaints and has reviewed in line with its regulatory obligations at export registered establishments.

All the best,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

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agriculture.gov.au

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From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 3:12 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Re: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

That's fine, thanks s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

And just one more question sorry. The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

- Diamond Valley Pork, Laverton VIC (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
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- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations
The Guardian | Australia

+61 (0) 422 283 681

christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

twitter: @knausc

On Tue, 1 Apr 2025 at 13:56, Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Hi Chris,

Thank you for sending these through and we're actioning a response for you.

Caretaker conventions, however, have affected our internal processes - impacting our response times - and we're likely to need until Thursday to get this back to you.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

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OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 11:15 AM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Re: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)},

Thanks again to you and the team for the comprehensive response.

We just wanted to put some follow-up questions to the department for further clarity on a few points. Also, I should note these are not statements made by the Guardian. They are being made by OPVs, former and current, in formalised internal and external complaints.

The follow up questions are below in bold:

1) The department says: "Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV". The 2019 Ombudsman complaint, made by roughly half the permanent OPV staff in NSW, explicitly stated that "For Instance, it is an accepted VEMS practice to have OPVs cover two establishments in the one day, leave establishments with no OPV for periods of greater than two days, and/or chronically understaff establishments by replacing OPVs with FSMAs. Some establishments in NSW have been without vets for 20 or more days in a year. This is not reflected in the OPV roster, which is published by VEMS weekly, but is not always reflective of what actually happens on plant." - **Are you saying that the situation has improved since 2019? Or that the ombudsman complaint is wrong?**

2) The department says: "This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities." The OPVs we have spoken to have said they are no longer able to directly write and submit welfare complaints of their own volition to state regulators. They say they are restricted only to overseeing the abattoir's self-reporting and that, if this doesn't occur, they often don't have the backing of their superiors, including technical managers, to take it further - **Is the department saying this is not true?**

3) The department says: "This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock." The OPVs we have spoken to say the WHS controls introduced by the department relate to ensuring animals are restrained before entering a pen. They say this is impossible in practice because most abattoirs do not have the facilities or resources to ensure animals are restrained for ante mortem inspections. This makes it an effective ban on entering pens - **Does the department dispute this? What level of restraint do the animals need to be under before an OPV can enter the pen? How many livestock handlers are needed and at what ratio to livestock?**

It'd be great to get a response to these follow-up questions by 3pm Wednesday.

Thanks again.

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations

The Guardian | Australia

+61 (0) 422 283 681

christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

twitter: @knausc

On Mon, 31 Mar 2025 at 17:32, Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com> wrote:

Thanks ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)}, appreciate it.

Christopher Knaus
Chief investigations correspondent
Guardian Australia
m: 0422283681
e: christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

On Mon, 31 Mar 2025, 5:11 pm Ag Media, <Media@aff.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Hi Christopher,

Thank you for your patience. Please see our response below:

What is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?

- The department rejects the statement made by the Guardian about its integrity in performing its regulatory responsibilities at export meat establishments. The department works cooperatively with

State/Territory counterparts to investigate animal welfare complaints in accordance with relevant legislation.

- Export-registered establishments are primarily responsible for identifying and actively managing animal welfare incidents in accordance with the *Australian Meat Standard for the Hygienic Production and Transportation of Meat and Meat Products for Human Consumption* (AS4696:2023) and any state/territory legislative requirements.
- The department ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken to address non-compliance with export control legislation.
- Export-registered establishments must also comply with state/territory animal welfare legislation and are required to follow direction given by the department to assist state/territory governments to investigate animal welfare incidents.

What is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?

- Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV.
- The department requires 110 OPVs to meet industry needs as per the Australian Export Meat Inspection System (AEMIS).
- The department currently has 162 OPVs employed across the department to ensure we can meet industry needs and allow for backfill for leave as required.

Why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?

- This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities.
- The department also ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken under the export control legislation where necessary.
- OPVs are encouraged to contact the department's senior veterinary technical managers for support in undertaking these actions if they need to do so.

Why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?

- This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock.

Why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?

- All on plant staff are issued with secure departmental devices.
- There is no departmental restriction to using a departmental device to take photos provided every effort is made to comply with privacy legislation.

What action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?

- It is not appropriate for the department to comment on a complaint that may have been made to the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

What action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?

- All disclosures made under the *Public Interest Disclosure Act 2013* (PID Act) are investigated in accordance with legislative requirements. The PID Act provides certain protections to individuals who have made a disclosure under the Act or witnesses who provide assistance in relation to a disclosure made under the Act. As such, the department is not able to comment on matters related to any public interest disclosures.

What action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?

- The safety of departmental employees is, and always has been, of paramount importance to the department. Staff may enter pens where there are appropriate controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock.

How does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?

- The department rejects the statement made by the Guardian that it is inherently conflicted in performing its regulatory responsibilities at export meat establishments.
- The department has a robust regulatory framework and takes regulatory action, where appropriate, for breaches of animal welfare requirements.

Does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

- The department has been made aware of the recent video footage collected by the Farm Transparency Project alleging poor animal welfare outcomes at one (1) export registered abattoir in Queensland. The department is considering the material from the FTP website and cannot provide comment on an active investigation.

Thanks,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

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OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 1:14 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi team,

Hope you're well.

I'm working on a piece about the on-plant veterinarian program administered by the agriculture department.

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.
- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on "profound problems" they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to "chronic understaffing". The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:
 - an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs

unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. "These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality," the complaint alleges. "It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors."

- a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were "profound problems" with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia's trade. "A culture of 'see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil' will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia's reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere," he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: "After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager's] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM's response was to reply 'I wish you hadn't told me that'. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV." He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. "In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner." The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a "cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal" in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: "I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant's Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly." The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: "The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal

welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."

- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.
- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:
 - they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.
 - Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.
 - staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.
 - some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."
- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

My questions on this are:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
- why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?
- why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?
- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

My deadline for this is Wednesday COB.

Many thanks,

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations

The Guardian | Australia

+61 (0) 422 283 681

christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

twitter: @knausc

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Monday, 14 April 2025 12:00 PM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: 1- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hey ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)}

1 of 2 emails on this- the journo's initial query below, and our eventual response. This took about a week, and the back and forth is in the archive somewhere, but a cast of several from meat exports, people services and legal all contributed. ^{s. 22(1)(i)} drove a lot of this with me in support and should be commended for pulling it together.

^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)}

From: Ag Media
Sent: Monday, 31 March 2025 5:12 PM
To: Christopher Knaus ; Ag Media
Subject: RE: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

OFFICIAL

Hi Christopher,

Thank you for your patience. Please see our response below:

What is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?

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Thanks,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

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OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 1:14 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi team,

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- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.
- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on "profound problems" they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to "chronic understaffing". The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:

- an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all times. "These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality," the complaint alleges. "It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors."

- a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were "profound problems" with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia's trade. "A culture of 'see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil' will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia's reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere," he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: "After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager's] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM's response was to reply 'I wish you hadn't told me that'. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV." He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. "In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner." The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a "cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal" in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: "I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant's Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly." The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: "The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."

- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.

- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:

- they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.
- Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.
- staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.
- some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."
- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

My questions on this are:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
- why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?
- why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?
- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

My deadline for this is Wednesday COB.

Many thanks,

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations
The Guardian | Australia

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twitter: @knausc

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Tuesday, 15 April 2025 10:19 AM
To: Simpson, Tim; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd; Mulhearn, Christine; Ag Media; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Wellington, Michelle; Way, Dennis; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: RE: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE COB- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Brilliant, thanks all.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Simpson, Tim
Sent: Tuesday, 15 April 2025 10:16 AM
To: Sanson -Fisher, Jadd ; Mulhearn, Christine ; Ag Media ; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Cc: Wellington, Michelle ; Way, Dennis ; s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: RE: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE COB- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

No changes from me either.

Thanks
Tim

s. 22(1)(a)(ii), s. 42(1)

s. 42(1)

OFFICIAL

From: Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Tuesday, 15 April 2025 9:52 AM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) s. 22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au
Subject: RE: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE COB- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)},

I am happy with this approach.

Christine

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Sent: Tuesday, 15 April 2025 9:46 AM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) @aff.gov.au; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) s. 22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au
Subject: RE: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE COB- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia [SEC=OFFICIAL]

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s. 42(1),s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

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 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
media@aff.gov.au
www.agriculture.gov.au



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From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) [@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)
Sent: Tuesday, 15 April 2025 9:19 AM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; Sanson -Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>
Cc: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) [s. 22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)
Subject: RE: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE COB- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Suggest we provide a very flat response on this one as transport of livestock is not regulated by the department.

- This matter was referred by the department to NSW Department of Primary Industries.
 - *That is, the regulatory agency where the incident was detected.*
- The transport of livestock is regulated through State and Territory legislation and implemented by the associated regulatory agency

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

A/Assistant Secretary
 Meat Export Branch | Exports and Veterinary Services Division
 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

 s. 22(1)(a)(ii) |  s. 22(1)(a)(ii) [@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Monday, 14 April 2025 10:33 AM

To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <[s.22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)>; Simpson, Tim <Tim.Simpson@aff.gov.au>; Sanson - Fisher, Jadd <Jadd.Sanson-Fisher@aff.gov.au>; Mulhearn, Christine <Christine.Mulhearn@aff.gov.au>

Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>; Way, Dennis <Dennis.Way@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <[s.22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)>

Subject: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE COB- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia

OFFICIAL

Good morning all,

We have another follow-up from the Guardian for their OVP piece. I'm including the majority of the message for context- the questions themselves are in bold.

I'm assuming that first responses will fall to s. 22(1)(a)(ii) and Christine, with Tim and Jadd checking afterwards? We're hoping to have a response ready for Dep Sec clearance by COB to meet the journalist's deadline. Please let us know if you have any queries or concerns.

MEDIA INQUIRY

I just had a follow-up query about one particular incident that we plan to report. On 19 April 2022, a livestock transport moved 600 head of sheep from near Shepparton to an export abattoir near Dubbo. The wet, cold conditions caused mass death on the truck, leading to the deaths of 103 sheep that were suffering hypothermia/exposure. The vast majority of the dead sheep were on the top deck of the truck, which appears to have been uncovered. They were discovered about 4pm in Forbes that day. The driver had been travelling since 7am. The last livestock check was about midday, four hours before the dead sheep were discovered near Forbes.

I understand Agriculture Victoria investigated this matter but took no action against the transporter, other than reminding it of its obligations under the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines (LAND TRANSPORT OF LIVESTOCK). Those guidelines require transporters to take reasonable steps to protect livestock from the impact of severe weather.

We have spoken to one OPV who says the incident was "horrific". We've also seen photos of the incident and plan to publish them.

The questions I have are:

- **what actions did the department take following this incident?**
- **was it referred by the department to Agriculture Victoria? Is it satisfied with the investigation and non-penalty by the state regulator?**
- **did the department have its own enforcement options in relation to this incident?**

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Tuesday, 15 April 2025 4:03 PM
To: Wellington, Michelle; Ag Media
Cc: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Subject: RE: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE 2PM- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Many thanks Michelle

From: Wellington, Michelle
Sent: Tuesday, 15 April 2025 4:02 PM
To: Ag Media
Cc: **s. 22(1)(a)(ii)**
Subject: RE: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE 2PM- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Cleared.

Kind regards,

Michelle Wellington PSM

Chief Strategy, Performance and Engagement Officer | First Assistant Secretary | **s. 47F(1)**

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Strategy, Performance and Engagement Division | Strategy, Enterprise and Engagement Group
Brisbane Regional Office, 42-44 Qantas Drive, Eagle Farm, Queensland, 4000
GPO Box 858, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia

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From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Tuesday, 15 April 2025 3:01 PM

To: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>

Cc: s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <[s.22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)>; Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: FW: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE 2PM- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi Michelle,

Pushing this one to the top of the inbox again- let me know if you're happy to proceed.

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

OFFICIAL

From: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Sent: Tuesday, 15 April 2025 10:48 AM

To: Wellington, Michelle <Michelle.Wellington@aff.gov.au>

Cc: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>; s. 22(1)(a)(ii) <[s.22\(1\)\(a\)\(ii\)@aff.gov.au](mailto:s.22(1)(a)(ii)@aff.gov.au)>

Subject: FW: [FOLLOW-UP] MEDIA INQUIRY- DUE 2PM- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program - Guardian Australia [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi Michelle,

Sending the following to you for final clearance (or sharing with Tess if req). This is the third set of questions from Chris Knaus at the Guardian on the OPV story they'll run shortly. Hoping to get this back to him by 2pm. Let me know if you're happy with the approach.

MEDIA INQUIRY

I just had a follow-up query about one particular incident that we plan to report. On 19 April 2022, a livestock transport moved 600 head of sheep from near Shepparton to an export abattoir near Dubbo. The wet, cold conditions caused mass death on the truck, leading to the deaths of 103 sheep that were suffering hypothermia/exposure. The vast majority of the dead sheep were on the top deck of the truck, which appears to have been uncovered. They were discovered about 4pm in Forbes that day. The driver had been travelling since 7am. The last livestock check was about midday, four hours before the dead sheep were discovered near Forbes.

The questions I have are:

- what actions did the department take following this incident?
- was it referred by the department to Agriculture Victoria? Is it satisfied with the investigation and non-penalty by the state regulator?
- did the department have its own enforcement options in relation to this incident?

PROPOSED RESPONSE (via s. 22(1)(a)(ii) , approved by Christine Mulhearn, Jadd Sanson-Fisher and Tim Simpson)

- This matter was referred by the department to NSW Department of Primary Industries.
 - *That is, the regulatory agency where the incident was detected.*
- The transport of livestock is regulated through State and Territory legislation and implemented by the associated regulatory agency

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 3:56 PM
To: **s. 47F(1)** (Treasury); **s. 47F(1)**
Cc: Ag Media
Subject: FW: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi **s. 47F(1)** and **s. 47F(1)**

FYI, the Guardian sent follow-ups for their OPV piece. We've provided the following responses.

The department says: "Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV". The 2019 Ombudsman complaint, made by roughly half the permanent OPV staff in NSW, explicitly stated that "For Instance, it is an accepted VEMS practice to have OPVs cover two establishments in the one day, leave establishments with no OPV for periods of greater than two days, and/or chronically understaff establishments by replacing OPVs with FSMAs. Some establishments in NSW have been without vets for 20 or more days in a year. This is not reflected in the OPV roster, which is published by VEMS weekly, but is not always reflective of what actually happens on plant." - **Are you saying that the situation has improved since 2019? Or that the ombudsman complaint is wrong?**

Response: The department rosters OPVs to service industry demand and ensures that it satisfies overseas market access requirements. Regulatory oversight is maintained at establishments as needed. The department has developed its on plant staffing model (both OPVs and Food Safety Meat Assessors) over time and continues to recruit on plant staff as required.

The department says: "This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities." The OPVs we have spoken to have said they are no longer able to directly write and submit welfare complaints of their own volition to state regulators. They say they are restricted only to overseeing the abattoir's self-reporting and that, if this doesn't occur, they often don't have the backing of their superiors, including technical managers, to take it further - **Is the department saying this is not true?**

Response: As part of their regulatory role within establishments, OPVs can and do write and submit welfare incident reports that may then be investigated by the regulator responsible (which is usually the relevant state or territory where the abattoir is located).

The department says: "This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock." The OPVs we have spoken to say the WHS controls introduced by the department relate to ensuring animals are restrained before entering a pen. They say this is impossible in practice because most abattoirs do not have the facilities or resources to ensure animals are restrained for ante mortem inspections. This makes it an effective ban on entering pens - **Does the department dispute this? What level of restraint do the animals need to be under before an OPV can enter the pen? How many livestock handlers are needed and at what ratio to livestock?**

Response: The Department has a WHS obligation to ensure that all staff have access to a safe working environment, this includes undertaking ante mortem inspection safely. Establishments are required to support departmental staff in undertaking ante mortem inspections while ensuring the delivery of effective animal welfare outcomes without jeopardising staff safety. The WHS controls for ante mortem can be physical (barrier/fencing/walk over) and includes the assistance of an establishment stock handler to assist in the separation of livestock within the pen. The number of stock handlers needs to be sufficient (minimum of one) to address the volume and type of livestock, e.g. cattle or sheep, and the physical layout of the livestock pen.

The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

- Diamond Valley Pork, Laverton VIC (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Tasmanian Quality Meats, Cressy TAS (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Ralph's Meats, Seymour VIC
- Game Meats Company, Eurobin VIC
- MD Foods, Echuca VIC
- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

Response: The department has received these complaints and has reviewed in line with its regulatory obligations at export registered establishments.

All the best,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

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Communications and Media Branch
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From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 3:12 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Re: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

That's fine, thanks s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

And just one more question sorry. The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

- Diamond Valley Pork, Laverton VIC (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Tasmanian Quality Meats, Cressy TAS (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Ralph's Meats, Seymour VIC
- Game Meats Company, Eurobin VIC
- MD Foods, Echuca VIC
- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

Christopher Knaus
Chief correspondent, investigations
The Guardian | Australia

+61 (0) 422 283 681
christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

twitter: @knausc

On Tue, 1 Apr 2025 at 13:56, Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Hi Chris,

Thank you for sending these through and we're actioning a response for you.

Caretaker conventions, however, have affected our internal processes - impacting our response times - and we're likely to need until Thursday to get this back to you.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

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Note to media: Unless otherwise agreed, the information contained in this email is for background and is not for attribution.

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From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 11:15 AM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Re: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Thanks again to you and the team for the comprehensive response.

We just wanted to put some follow-up questions to the department for further clarity on a few points. Also, I should note these are not statements made by the Guardian. They are being made by OPVs, former and current, in formalised internal and external complaints.

The follow up questions are below in bold:

1) The department says: "Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV". The 2019 Ombudsman complaint, made by roughly half the permanent OPV staff in NSW, explicitly stated that "For Instance, it is an accepted VEMS practice to have OPVs cover two establishments in the one day, leave establishments with no OPV for periods of greater than two days, and/or chronically understaff establishments by replacing OPVs with FSMAs. Some establishments in NSW have been without vets for 20 or more days in a year. This is not reflected in the OPV roster, which is published by VEMS weekly, but is not always reflective of what actually happens on plant." - **Are you saying that the situation has improved since 2019? Or that the ombudsman complaint is wrong?**

2) The department says: "This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities." The OPVs we have spoken to have said they are no longer able to directly write and submit welfare complaints of their own volition to state regulators. They say they are restricted only to overseeing the abattoir's self-reporting and that, if this doesn't occur, they often don't have the backing of their superiors, including technical managers, to take it further - **Is the department saying this is not true?**

3) The department says: "This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock." The OPVs we have spoken to say the WHS controls introduced by the department relate to ensuring animals are restrained before entering a pen. They say this is impossible in practice because most abattoirs do not have the facilities or resources to ensure animals are restrained for ante mortem inspections. This makes it an effective ban on entering pens - **Does the department dispute this? What level of restraint do the animals need to be under before an OPV can enter the pen? How many livestock handlers are needed and at what ratio to livestock?**

It'd be great to get a response to these follow-up questions by 3pm Wednesday.

Thanks again.

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations

The Guardian | Australia

+61 (0) 422 283 681

christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

twitter: @knausc

On Mon, 31 Mar 2025 at 17:32, Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com> wrote:

Thanks ^{s. 22(1)(a)(iii)} appreciate it.

Christopher Knaus
Chief investigations correspondent
Guardian Australia
m: 0422283681
e: christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

On Mon, 31 Mar 2025, 5:11 pm Ag Media, <Media@aff.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Hi Christopher,

Thank you for your patience. Please see our response below:

What is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?

- The department rejects the statement made by the Guardian about its integrity in performing its regulatory responsibilities at export meat establishments. The department works cooperatively with State/Territory counterparts to investigate animal welfare complaints in accordance with relevant legislation.

- Export-registered establishments are primarily responsible for identifying and actively managing animal welfare incidents in accordance with the *Australian Meat Standard for the Hygienic Production and Transportation of Meat and Meat Products for Human Consumption* (AS4696:2023) and any state/territory legislative requirements.
- The department ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken to address non-compliance with export control legislation.
- Export-registered establishments must also comply with state/territory animal welfare legislation and are required to follow direction given by the department to assist state/territory governments to investigate animal welfare incidents.

What is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?

- Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV.
- The department requires 110 OPVs to meet industry needs as per the Australian Export Meat Inspection System (AEMIS).
- The department currently has 162 OPVs employed across the department to ensure we can meet industry needs and allow for backfill for leave as required.

Why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?

- This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities.
- The department also ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken under the export control legislation where necessary.
- OPVs are encouraged to contact the department's senior veterinary technical managers for support in undertaking these actions if they need to do so.

Why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?

- This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock.

Why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?

- All on plant staff are issued with secure departmental devices.
- There is no departmental restriction to using a departmental device to take photos provided every effort is made to comply with privacy legislation.

What action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?

- It is not appropriate for the department to comment on a complaint that may have been made to the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

What action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?

- All disclosures made under the *Public Interest Disclosure Act 2013* (PID Act) are investigated in accordance with legislative requirements. The PID Act provides certain protections to individuals who have made a disclosure under the Act or witnesses who provide assistance in relation to a disclosure made under the Act. As such, the department is not able to comment on matters related to any public interest disclosures.

What action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?

- The safety of departmental employees is, and always has been, of paramount importance to the department. Staff may enter pens where there are appropriate controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock.

How does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?

- The department rejects the statement made by the Guardian that it is inherently conflicted in performing its regulatory responsibilities at export meat establishments.
- The department has a robust regulatory framework and takes regulatory action, where appropriate, for breaches of animal welfare requirements.

Does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

- The department has been made aware of the recent video footage collected by the Farm Transparency Project alleging poor animal welfare outcomes at one (1) export registered abattoir in Queensland. The department is considering the material from the FTP website and cannot provide comment on an active investigation.

Thanks,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

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.....

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OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Monday, 24 March 2025 1:14 PM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi team,

Hope you're well.

I'm working on a piece about the on-plant veterinarian program administered by the agriculture department.

The facts as we currently understand them are as follows:

- the Australian government relies on a team of on-plant veterinarians (OPVs) working inside export-licensed abattoirs to safeguard animal welfare, prevent meat contamination and ensure the standards of trading partners, like the European Union, China and the United States, are met.

- multiple veterinarians have repeatedly blown the whistle internally and externally on “profound problems” they say are crippling their ability to oversee the industry. They say their ability to monitor animal welfare and report breaches is compromised, and that abattoirs are going unmonitored due to “chronic understaffing”. The complaints have been made across a five-year period by veterinarians working in NSW and Victoria, and include:

- an external complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman in 2019 by half the OPVs working in NSW. This complaint alleges chronic understaffing is leaving abattoirs unmonitored at times, including for up to 20 days per year. The complaint alleged NSW facilities have been left without a permanent veterinarian presence, relying instead on relief staff, and that the rostering documentation did not reflect reality. The complainants said this put Australia in breach of trade obligations with partners that require an OPV presence at all

times. "These rosters are regularly completed to look compliant but do not reflect reality," the complaint alleges. "It is our opinion that this contains a significant hidden threat if discovered by foreign auditors."

- a public interest disclosure made separately in 2023. That PID was made directly to then minister Murray Watt in 2023. The discloser, a veterinarian who worked for three years at facilities in NSW and Victoria, said there were "profound problems" with the system and that, without action, the failures risked undermining Australia's trade. "A culture of 'see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil' will be entrenched and animal welfare will further suffer and Australia's reputation in agriculture will plummet and some countries will take their trade dollars elsewhere," he warned. The veterinarian said in his PID many of the abattoirs he worked in were competently and professionally-run with few welfare incidents, but he also described a series of breaches he witnessed that had gone unreported. During one 2017 audit meeting, he said he witnessed his departmental manager discouraging abattoir staff from reporting an instance of animal cruelty – a pig being struck in the head prior to arriving at the facility – to the state regulator. The PID said: "After the meeting I commented that I was surprised by the [field operations manager's] response. I stated the animal was clearly injured and suffering. The FOM's response was to reply 'I wish you hadn't told me that'. This was a comment I was to hear many times as I worked as an OPV." He also described discovering dead cattle on trucks on an almost daily basis at a hot boning plant in Victoria in 2018. "In each case this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. The responsible [area technical manager] was however not able to provide any support for OPVs who wanted to proceed in this manner." The PID described an extreme example in mid-2018 in which he discovered a "cow with a calf stuck in its pelvic canal" in the holding yard. He later learned the calf had likely been there for five days. His PID says: "I informed the staff who were accompanying me that I would remove the calf. I proceeded to remove the calf - a job not made more pleasant by the fact the calf disintegrated in my hands. An event such as this should have triggered an animal welfare incident report. Sadly, the responsible [manager] was too weak in character and instead told me he had apologised to the plant's Quality Assurance Manager. Apparently the OPV is not supposed to render assistance to suffering animals. This ludicrous situation is emblematic of the failure of the OPVs being able to do their job correctly." The PID also described chronic understaffing and near weekly crises as the department struggled to find vets to staff facilities. He said he had been left isolated and unsupported, including by managers in Canberra with no technical expertise in veterinary science. He has now been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, according to his PID. The author of this PID has declined to comment further to the Guardian about the contents of his PID or about the program more broadly, and has no knowledge of any other complaints lodged by other OPVs.

- a complaint by a resigning veterinarian last year, in which he warned that OPVs had been left unable to do their job of protecting animal welfare due to rule changes around ante-mortem inspections. His resignation letter said: "The circumstances and conditions of employment as an OPV have changed since I initially accepted the offer. Following my acceptance of the offer of renewed employment, I have been directed by my supervisor to not enter pens containing animals to perform ante-mortem inspection. This will mean that in some instances, especially with small stock, it will not be possible to perform an effective ante-mortem inspection. As a result there will be an adverse effect on detection of animal welfare, food safety and emergency animal disease cases. This will result in unsatisfactory regulatory outcomes. As a registered veterinarian in NSW, animal welfare is the required primary concern and consideration in the practice of veterinary science. The directions I

have been given are inconsistent with meeting this requirement and I cannot accept the offer of employment as an OPV."

- we understand the 2023 PID and the 2019 ombudsman complaint prompted internal investigations. The substance of the 2023 PID was found to be substantiated, but the department said it was not "disclosable conduct", meaning it would not be disclosed to any other agency. It instead dealt with it through internal recommendations. The 2019 Ombudsman complaint also prompted an internal review and the engagement of consultants. It is not clear what the outcome of this review was.
- we have also spoken with other former OPVs. They say the following:
 - they are unable to write reports on animal welfare incidents and submit them to state regulators. This used to be within their remit. But a process change means now they can only ask abattoir companies to self-report to state regulators and then oversee the self-reporting process. This presents an inherent conflict and significantly curtails their ability to act on animal welfare. The veterinarians said they frequently felt they had no backing from their managers to raise welfare issues, or were actively discouraged from doing so. It also left them vulnerable to bullying, intimidation or harassment from abattoir companies.
 - Staff were also told they were unable to take photos on their own devices inside the abattoir premises. This also limited their ability to document breaches.
 - staff say understaffing is so bad that veterinarians are being sent interstate to cover a single shift at an abattoir. This might involve 2-3 days of travel to cover a single shift. One said he was sent 220km to cover a single shift.
 - some staff say the department is inherently conflicted. It has an aim of boosting and promoting trade and the continued/uninterrupted export of meat, but also has a role through the OPV program of monitoring animal welfare. One said: "Their goal is to export meat from Australia and that's what they want to do. Satisfying the importing country's requirements in regards to animal welfare - they're just minor details. They've got to put on a show that they're satisfying those conditions. The reality is a lot of it's just window dressing." Another said that, should foreign auditors discover the reality of Australia's regulation of the industry, "entire markets will be lost overnight". "Our animal welfare is one of Australia's marketing strengths. If lost, markets will also be lost."
- activist group Farm Transparency Project has collected evidence from seven export abattoirs across the country. The group works by trespassing and installing covert cameras. They say the cameras have recorded shocking footage of welfare breaches and shows the OPV system is not working to prevent such breaches. Animals Australia, a leading animal protection group, says OPVs are being placed in an inherently compromised situation. They have called for an independent office for animal welfare, saying the department is inherently conflicted.

My questions on this are:

- what is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?
- what is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?
- why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?
- why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?
- why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2019 ombudsman complaint? What was the outcome of its internal review?
- what action did the department take in response to the 2023 PID?
- what action did the department take in response to the warnings about ante-mortem inspections contained in an OPV's resignation letter last year?
- how does the department respond to allegations it is inherently conflicted because of its dual role of promoting trade and meat exports, and monitoring animal welfare?
- does it accept that evidence collected by the Farm Transparency Project at seven export abattoirs shows the OPV system is not working to safeguard animal welfare?

My deadline for this is Wednesday COB.

Many thanks,

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations

The Guardian | Australia

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s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

From: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Sent: Monday, 14 April 2025 12:02 PM
To: s. 22(1)(a)(ii)
Subject: 2- Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Email 2 of 2- the follow up and our answers. Will share today's progress with you when it happens.

From: Ag Media
Sent: Thursday, 3 April 2025 3:54 PM
To: Christopher Knaus ; Ag Media
Subject: RE: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Good afternoon Christopher,

Thanks for your patience. The following answers can be attributed to a departmental spokesperson.

The department says: "Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV". The 2019 Ombudsman complaint, made by roughly half the permanent OPV staff in NSW, explicitly stated that "For Instance, it is an accepted VEMS practice to have OPVs cover two establishments in the one day, leave establishments with no OPV for periods of greater than two days, and/or chronically understaff establishments by replacing OPVs with FSMAs. Some establishments in NSW have been without vets for 20 or more days in a year. This is not reflected in the OPV roster, which is published by VEMS weekly, but is not always reflective of what actually happens on plant." - **Are you saying that the situation has improved since 2019? Or that the ombudsman complaint is wrong?**

Response: The department rosters OPVs to service industry demand and ensures that it satisfies overseas market access requirements. Regulatory oversight is maintained at establishments as needed. The department has developed its on plant staffing model (both OPVs and Food Safety Meat Assessors) over time and continues to recruit on plant staff as required.

The department says: "This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities." The OPVs we have spoken to have said they are no longer able to directly write and submit welfare complaints of their own volition to state regulators. They say they are restricted only to overseeing the abattoir's self-reporting and that, if this doesn't occur, they often don't have the backing of their superiors, including technical managers, to take it further - **Is the department saying this is not true?**

Response: As part of their regulatory role within establishments, OPVs can and do write and submit welfare incident reports that may then be investigated by the regulator responsible (which is usually the relevant state or territory where the abattoir is located).

The department says: "This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock." The OPVs we have spoken to say the WHS controls

introduced by the department relate to ensuring animals are restrained before entering a pen. They say this is impossible in practice because most abattoirs do not have the facilities or resources to ensure animals are restrained for ante mortem inspections. This makes it an effective ban on entering pens - **Does the department dispute this? What level of restraint do the animals need to be under before an OPV can enter the pen? How many livestock handlers are needed and at what ratio to livestock?**

Response: The Department has a WHS obligation to ensure that all staff have access to a safe working environment, this includes undertaking ante mortem inspection safely. Establishments are required to support departmental staff in undertaking ante mortem inspections while ensuring the delivery of effective animal welfare outcomes without jeopardising staff safety. The WHS controls for ante mortem can be physical (barrier/fencing/walk over) and includes the assistance of an establishment stock handler to assist in the separation of livestock within the pen. The number of stock handlers needs to be sufficient (minimum of one) to address the volume and type of livestock, e.g. cattle or sheep, and the physical layout of the livestock pen.

The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

- Diamond Valley Pork, Laverton VIC (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Tasmanian Quality Meats, Cressy TAS (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Ralph's Meats, Seymour VIC
- Game Meats Company, Eurobin VIC
- MD Foods, Echuca VIC
- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

Response: The department has received these complaints and has reviewed in line with its regulatory obligations at export registered establishments.

All the best,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Media

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Communications and Media Branch
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From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>
Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 3:12 PM
To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>
Subject: Re: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

That's fine, thanks s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

And just one more question sorry. The FTP say they have submitted complaints about seven export abattoirs. They are:

- Diamond Valley Pork, Laverton VIC (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
- Tasmanian Quality Meats, Cressy TAS (prepared and lodged by Animals Australia, in relation to FTP footage)
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- Cedar Meats, Brooklyn VIC
- Greenmountain Food Processing, Coominya QLD

Has the department received those complaints and investigated those matters?

Christopher Knaus
Chief correspondent, investigations
The Guardian | Australia

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twitter: @knausc

On Tue, 1 Apr 2025 at 13:56, Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Hi Chris,

Thank you for sending these through and we're actioning a response for you.

Caretaker conventions, however, have affected our internal processes - impacting our response times - and we're likely to need until Thursday to get this back to you.

Kind regards,

s. 22(1)(a)(ii) (she/her)

Media

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Communications and Media Branch

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OFFICIAL

From: Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com>

Sent: Tuesday, 1 April 2025 11:15 AM

To: Ag Media <Media@aff.gov.au>

Subject: Re: Query re: on-plant veterinarian program

Hi s. 22(1)(a)(ii)

Thanks again to you and the team for the comprehensive response.

We just wanted to put some follow-up questions to the department for further clarity on a few points. Also, I should note these are not statements made by the Guardian. They are being made by OPVs, former and current, in formalised internal and external complaints.

The follow up questions are below in bold:

1) The department says: "Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV". The 2019 Ombudsman complaint, made by roughly half the permanent OPV staff in NSW, explicitly stated that "For Instance, it is an accepted VEMS practice to have OPVs cover two establishments in the one day, leave establishments with no OPV for periods of greater than two days, and/or chronically understaff establishments by replacing OPVs with FSMAs. Some establishments in NSW have been without vets for 20 or more days in a year. This is not reflected in the OPV roster, which is published by VEMS weekly, but is not always reflective of what actually happens on plant." - **Are you saying that the situation has improved since 2019? Or that the ombudsman complaint is wrong?**

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It'd be great to get a response to these follow-up questions by 3pm Wednesday.

Thanks again.

Christopher Knaus

Chief correspondent, investigations

The Guardian | Australia

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christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

twitter: @knausc

On Mon, 31 Mar 2025 at 17:32, Christopher Knaus <christopher.knaus@theguardian.com> wrote:

Thanks ^{s. 22(1)(a)(ii)} appreciate it.

Christopher Knaus
Chief investigations correspondent
Guardian Australia
m: 0422283681
e: christopher.knaus@guardian.co.uk

On Mon, 31 Mar 2025, 5:11 pm Ag Media, <Media@aff.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Hi Christopher,

Thank you for your patience. Please see our response below:

What is the department's response to allegations the OPV system suffers from profound problems that restrict veterinarians' ability to act on animal welfare? Does the department dispute any of the facts outlined above?

- The department rejects the statement made by the Guardian about its integrity in performing its regulatory responsibilities at export meat establishments. The department works cooperatively with

State/Territory counterparts to investigate animal welfare complaints in accordance with relevant legislation.

- Export-registered establishments are primarily responsible for identifying and actively managing animal welfare incidents in accordance with the *Australian Meat Standard for the Hygienic Production and Transportation of Meat and Meat Products for Human Consumption* (AS4696:2023) and any state/territory legislative requirements.
- The department ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken to address non-compliance with export control legislation.
- Export-registered establishments must also comply with state/territory animal welfare legislation and are required to follow direction given by the department to assist state/territory governments to investigate animal welfare incidents.

What is the department's response to allegations of chronic understaffing, that has left some abattoirs without an OPV presence? Is this in breach of Australia's trade obligations?

- Export abattoirs that require an OPV do not operate without an OPV.
- The department requires 110 OPVs to meet industry needs as per the Australian Export Meat Inspection System (AEMIS).
- The department currently has 162 OPVs employed across the department to ensure we can meet industry needs and allow for backfill for leave as required.

Why are OPV staff unable to make their own reports to state regulators on welfare breaches?

- This is incorrect. OPVs will, and do, undertake action(s) where an incident has not been identified or acted upon appropriately by an establishment, including reporting the incident to relevant state/territory authorities.
- The department also ensures that appropriate regulatory action is taken under the export control legislation where necessary.
- OPVs are encouraged to contact the department's senior veterinary technical managers for support in undertaking these actions if they need to do so.

Why are OPV staff unable to enter pens to make ante-mortem inspections?

- This is incorrect. Staff can enter pens where there are appropriate WHS controls in place, including for example establishment livestock handlers being present to assist in the handling and movement of stock.

Why are OPV staff unable to take photos using their mobiles in abattoir premises?

- All on plant staff are issued with secure departmental devices.
- There is no departmental restriction to using a departmental device to take photos provided every effort is made to comply with privacy legislation.